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THE CRISIS IN GREAT BRITAIN.

BY SYDNEY BROOKS.

“THE homely old phrase,” said the “Times” of April 2nd, “‘All at sixes and sevens’ best sums up the situation.” I have no fault whatever to find with this diagnosis of the present state of British politics. They are, in sober fact, an illimitable chaos. The only sure and incontrovertible thing about them is that there must shortly be another General Election, a General Election which nobody in or out of Parliament wants, yet which every one agrees is inevitable. It may even have come before this article appears in print. It may be held over until May and compete, if anything could compete, with the overwhelming welcome that is being prepared for Mr. Roosevelt. It may even be postponed till June. But that it is a certainty of the near future is a fact which all parties accept with such resignation as they can muster. The gloomier prophets draw an even more disheartening picture. They assert that the next appeal to the country will produce, like the last, an indecisive result; that the people are not likely to alter in May or June the verdict they registered in January; that the Irish Nationalists will return once more from the polls the masters of British politics; that all the confusion in which the country now finds itself will be renewed and duplicated; and that the only way out of the tangle will be yet another General Election—the third in the course of a single year. That is an appalling prospect, but no one would venture to call it incredible. With British parties and policies in their existing condition nothing is incredible. The Lords were warned that if they rejected the Budget they must inevitably raise issues, the settlement of which would plunge the nation for many months, possibly for many years, to come, in a whirlpool of domestic distraction. The warning was disregarded,

and the country in consequence is to-day, and will long remain, in the throes of a revolution, a peaceable revolution, but fraught, none the less, with results of incalculable significance to the British State.

With the interplay of the various elements and forces that constitute a crisis that has no precedent in British history, Americans can hardly be expected to concern themselves. To show why it is that a Government with a paper majority of 124 is yet impotent and discredited; to trace the cleavages in the Cabinet and in the party between those who think it sufficient to restrict the legislative powers of the House of Lords and those who think that the Upper Chamber should also be reformed; to explain all that has followed from the fact that the Irish Nationalists, who compose two-thirds of the Government's majority and can at any moment convert it into a minority by voting in the Opposition lobby, while as zealous as most Liberals, and more zealous than a good many, for the abolition of the Lords' effective veto on legislation, are also hostile to the Budget, which all Liberals and all the Labor men look upon as a point of honor to pass; to estimate the extent to which Mr. Redmond's influence and strategy have been affected by the rise of the O'Brienites in his rear and by the virtual bankruptcy of the Nationalist exchequer; to explore the hidden but potent effects of the unwillingness of the Opposition to assume office in the event of Mr. Asquith's resignation; to unravel, in short, the skein of a political situation in which every day produces a new complication—all this, while an engrossing task for an observer on the spot, would scarcely, I imagine, interest and would almost certainly confuse lookers-on three thousand miles away. I pass by, therefore, much that forms the staple theme of newspaper writing and lobby gossip—the manœuvres, the deals, the negotiations with this section and that, and so on—and devote this article to some of the broader features of the crisis.

Its first and most momentous development is that the Lords, by voluntary resolution, have signed away their legislative birth-right. On March 14th Lord Rosebery, speaking with the weight both of an ex-Premier and of one who has consistently advocated the reform of the House of Lords and whose action, therefore, could not be assailed at any point as a mere move in the game of party, submitted the following motion:

That the House do resolve itself into a Committee to consider the best means of reforming its existing organization, so as to constitute a strong and efficient Second Chamber; and in the event of such motion being agreed to, to move the following resolutions:

(1) That a strong and efficient Second Chamber is not merely an integral part of the British Constitution, but is necessary to the well-being of the State and to the balance of Parliament.

(2) That such a Chamber can best be obtained by the reform and reconstitution of the House of Lords.

(3) That a necessary preliminary of such reform and reconstitution is the acceptance of the principle that the possession of a Peerage should no longer of itself give the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords.

Of these resolutions the third was, of course, by far the most important. After a brilliant debate, it was carried by 175 to 17, the first two resolutions having been adopted unanimously. It is true that those who took part in the division represented less than a third of the entire House, that Lord Lansdowne declared that it was possible for any Peer to vote for the resolution "with the full intention of afterwards proposing that the House should consist entirely of hereditary Peers," that between adopting such a resolution and agreeing upon a definite scheme of reorganization there is a very wide gulf; and that the temper of the debate showed very little sympathy with the objections which the Liberal party takes to the House of Lords, namely, that apart altogether from its composition and the hereditary principle, it is a permanently partisan Assembly preponderantly in favor of one party and one special group of interests. Nevertheless, the fact that the Lords have resolved that the right to legislate shall no longer be an appurtenance of a Peerage is a fact of the utmost moment in British Constitutional history. The primary idea, as Freeman called it, of the English Peerage, the characteristic that has differentiated it from the ordinary type of nobility in other lands, where the aristocracy rests on rank and privilege alone, is its political power. For the Lords to divest themselves of this power, to go on record with the admission that a Peer merely because he is a Peer should no longer be entitled to sit and vote in the Upper Chamber, is therefore a development of the highest significance. All Englishmen felt, when they saw the

figures for and against Lord Rosebery's motion, that whatever might be its immediate outcome, something had been done which could never be undone, and that the discussion of the House of Lords question must henceforward proceed on the basis of the acknowledgment that the hereditary principle was outworn and that the time has come to modify or discard it.

And yet the action of the Lords in thus passing what is virtually a vote of no confidence in themselves has something of the aspect, as the Liberals have been quick to point out, of a *non-sequitur*. Less than five months ago they felt strong enough to violate all tradition and all the accepted axioms of the Constitution by refusing to pass the Budget. To-day they make the collective admission that the principle which for centuries has governed their composition must be diluted or abandoned. Less than five months ago they wrought a revolution. To-day they confess themselves unfit to carry on the ordinary business of government. And in the interval what has happened? Have not the Lords been hailed as the saviors of their country? Has not every building in the kingdom echoed with glorifications of the hereditary theory and with gratitude to the Lords for daring to do their duty? Did they not refer the Budget to the people, and have not the people abundantly justified their boldness by electing a House of Commons that contains a considerable majority hostile to the Budget? Did not the Peers themselves venture on the platform, extolling the virtues of the Upper Chamber and contrasting its calm impartiality with the immoderate impulses and the gross partisanship that afflict the House of Commons? Why, then, this sudden conviction of unworthiness? Well, there are several reasons for it. In the first place, the more far-seeing Peers realize perfectly well that the British democracy will not allow the power of the purse, and with it the power of unmaking Governments, to be vested in an Assembly constituted as the House of Lords now is, an Assembly that stands altogether outside the representative principle, that is wholly non-elective and indissoluble and that can never, therefore, be called to account. In the second place, all the Peers who in the past have taken up the question of reforming the House of Lords from within have been stimulated to fresh activities by the prospect of having it reformed from without. In the third place, the Peers find themselves confronted by a House-of-

Commons majority of 120 Liberals who, if they are at odds on other questions, are unanimous in their determination to abolish the Lords' veto on finance and restrict it on everything else. The success of Lord Rosebery's resolution was, therefore, in part the result of an uneasy conscience, in part of a sincere belief in the necessity of reform, and in part of a shrewd perception that in the long run the House of Lords could only retain its legislative powers intact by changing its composition. How far Lord Rosebery will succeed in the infinitely more difficult part of his task—that of elaborating a scheme of reorganization that will be acceptable to the Peers, that will satisfy moderate opinion in the country and that will be something more than the “sham” and the “coat of democratic whitewash” that the Liberals are pronouncing it to be—though I may add that it has not yet been produced and that they cannot, therefore, know anything about it—remains to be seen. What, however, is already certain is that the ex-Premier, by his courage and prescience, has contrived to pit the reform of the House of Lords against the abolition or restriction of its legislative powers, and that it is along these two lines that the battle henceforward will proceed—the Conservatives, of course, siding with the reform of the Upper House from within and the Liberals being mainly intent on depriving it of the power to reject any measure that has passed the House of Commons in three successive sessions.

Almost every journal and politician in the country has some scheme or other to propose for reforming the House of Lords and determining the powers it is to possess. I do not propose to enumerate these multitudinous essays, much less examine them. But it may, perhaps, be of service if I attempt to indicate very roughly what I conceive to be the preponderant opinion of the country on the general question. The nation, I believe, has pretty well made up its mind that the House of Lords needs reorganizing, with a view to diminishing its size, to getting rid of its indifferent members, to correcting its political partisanship and its excessive representation of the views and interests of a particular class, and to bringing it more directly under the operation of public opinion. But it has no desire to erect a brand-new Second Chamber or even to make the House of Lords preponderantly elective by popular vote. The instinct of Englishmen has always been to defer change till the last possible mo-

ment and then to effect it gradually and in small instalments. I see little reason as yet to think that this instinct is exhausted. The country, as a whole, wishes to preserve and not to destroy the historical continuity of the House of Lords, and, at the same time, to bring it rather more into line with the instincts and requirements of a modern democratic State. If, for instance, the House of Lords were to be reduced to a membership of, say, 300; if two-thirds of these were to be elected by the Peers from among the members of their own order; and if the remaining one-third were to be nominated by the Crown or elected by groups of constituencies or of local bodies for the period of each Parliament—if something of this kind were to be done, the British people, in my judgment, would be well satisfied. The result would not, of course, be an “impartial” Second Chamber—there never has been or can be an impartial Second Chamber. It would not be a Liberal Second Chamber—a Liberal Second Chamber is all but a contradiction in terms. But though its tone would be rightly and preponderantly Conservative, it would be freed to some extent from its subjection to the Conservative party; it would be strong in the consciousness that a large minority of its members were drawn at first or second hand from the people; it would be able—and this is what the country wants—to assert itself in the interests of the nation against the excesses of both parties.

As to the powers that such an Assembly should possess, I think one may fairly lay it down that the majority of Englishmen wish them to be real powers—powers not only of criticism, amendment and delay, but of rejection. Great Britain will never tolerate any plan that establishes the unchecked omnipotence of the House of Commons. Neither will it permit the House of Lords to become the predominant partner in the State or put it in a position to thwart the settled will of the country. But that the Upper Chamber must have the right to refer to the electorate measures of far-reaching import that have not received the approval of the nation, seems to most Englishmen as vital as that it should cease to oppose a measure that has once been ratified by the people at the polls. In other words, the country, so far as I can read its mind, is content that the Lords should continue to retain the powers it already possesses. It knows that the characteristic of the House of Lords hitherto has been not tyranny,

but timidity; it is well aware that on many occasions it has proved a truer exponent of the national will than the House of Commons; and it is less disturbed by the Lords' occasional rejection of Liberal measures than by their uniform and uncritical acceptance of whatever Bills a Conservative Government may please to submit to them. It concludes, therefore, that the Upper House, and especially an Upper House reformed on the lines already indicated, may safely exercise the powers of not alone revising, altering and delaying the measures sent to it, but also of rejecting them and of referring them to the supreme tribunal of the people. But should this apply to measures of finance? Should the Lords be permitted to keep the right of rejecting the Budget and of thus forcing a dissolution and bringing the machinery of Government to a standstill? I find it difficult to say what the country thinks on this part of the problem. Personally I incline strongly to the view that the financial veto of the Lords should be not merely restricted, but abolished; and such I believe, but dare not confidently assert, to be the view which will ultimately prevail. Apart, however, from this, I detect no real movement of opinion in favor of cutting down the legislative prerogatives of the House of Lords.

Assuming this diagnosis of public opinion to be substantially correct, let us now consider what it is the Government proposes. On March 29th Mr. Asquith moved: "That this House will immediately resolve itself into a Committee to consider the relations between the two Houses of Parliament and the question of the duration of Parliament." It was announced, at the same time, that the resolutions to be proposed in Committee were three in number. The first declared the expediency of disabling the House of Lords by law from rejecting or amending a Money Bill; defined a Money Bill; and left it to the Speaker to decide whether any given measure came within the definition. The second resolution restricted the powers of the House of Lords as respects Bills other than Money Bills, "so that any such Bill which has passed the House of Commons in three successive sessions, and having been sent up to the House of Lords at least one month before the end of the session, has been rejected by that House in each of these sessions, shall become law without the consent of the House of Lords on the Royal Assent being declared, provided that at least two years shall have elapsed between

the date of the first introduction of the Bill in the House of Commons and the date on which it passes the House of Commons for the last time." This resolution also stated that a Bill should be considered as rejected by the House of Lords, unless it passed either without amendment or with only such amendments as both Houses might agree upon. The third and final resolution limited the duration of Parliament to five years.

The debate on the motion that the House should resolve itself into a Committee to consider these resolutions reached an extraordinary high standard even for an Assembly with the traditions of the House of Commons. Mr. Asquith's motion was eventually adopted on April 4th by a majority of 106—practically the full strength of the Government forces; and the House, as I write, is preparing to discuss the resolutions one by one. That they will all have been carried by the time these lines are read may be taken for granted. When carried they will be sent at once up to the House of Lords, and the Lords will either reject them outright or simply decline to consider them until the Bills which are to be based upon them have also been passed by the Lower House. In any case, it will be made perfectly clear that the Lords have no intention of signing the warrant for their execution. What will the Government do then? Will Mr. Asquith resign office, dissolve Parliament or do as Mr. Redmond wishes him to do—that is, approach the King with a request for guarantees that the resolutions and the Bills founded on them, if endorsed by the people at the polls, shall become law? Nobody knows. Nobody can know until, for one thing, it is seen whether the Irish Nationalists have been propitiated into allowing last year's Budget to pass. If they remain obdurate on that point, the Government may be thrown out when the motion for allotting a specified portion of Parliamentary time to the discussion of the Budget comes to be debated in the House of Commons.

The most hardened political prophet might well hesitate in the face of the innumerable possibilities of the situation to venture on any definite forecast. For myself I indulge in no predictions as to how or when or in what form the fluidity of the present chaos will ultimately solidify. My purpose for the moment is merely that of pointing out the lines along which the greatest Constitutional crisis that has confronted England for

two hundred years seems destined to proceed. On the one hand, there are the Lords, backed by the Conservative party, formulating a scheme for changing the composition of the Upper House, but tenaciously resisting any invasion of its legislative powers. On the other hand, are the Liberals insisting that the Lords shall be forbidden by statute to amend or reject a Money Bill, and that any measure passed in three successive sessions by the House of Commons shall become law at the end of two years from the date of its first introduction, whether the Lords consent or no?

Here obviously are issues and policies that go down to the very roots of government, and I shall hope in a future article to examine their significance and their feasibility or otherwise in the general scheme of the British State.

SYDNEY BROOKS.